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ABSTRACT

Base Christian communities (also know as base-level ecclesial communities or CEBs) are small groups of Christians, mainly Catholics and mainly in Latin America, that come together for scripture study, prayer, and fellowship. They frequently turn their attention toward social ills and address problems existing within society. The origin of CEBs can be traced to religious developments within the Brazilian Catholic Church in the late 1960s, when a shortage of Brazilian clergy and calls from the Vatican for greater spiritual development among the people led to the development of prayer and education groups led by laypersons. Twenty years later there are over 100,000 CEBs in Brazil alone. Although CEBs have been looked upon favorably by the church hierarchy from their inception, there is some concern that they might become an alternative to institutional Catholicism. CEBs have also been linked to liberation theology, a view of theology that has developed primarily in Latin America over the past 20 years and that rejects the abstract and theoretical nature of theology. The pedagogy of Paulo Freire has also had an important effect on the shaping of CEBs, particularly with his concept of conscientization. CEBs also pose a challenge to adult education in the United States. (MN)

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Base Christian Communities:

A Challenge to the Status Quo

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Abstract

Base Christian Communities are small groups of Christians, primarily Catholic and primarily in Latin America, that come together for scripture study, prayer and fellowship. They are frequently characterized by their tendency to analyze social ills and to address problems within society. This paper discusses the development of these communities over the past twenty years. It also shows the relationship the CEBs have with the church hierarchy, liberation theology and the pedagogy of Paul Freire. A final section analyzes the implication of CEBs for the U.S.

Base Christian Communities:
A Challenge to the Status Quo

The subject of this paper is "Base Christian Communities". I would like to begin by sharing an experience I had last January. The location was a poor neighborhood in Cuernavaca, which is about 60 miles southwest of Mexico City. A group of about twenty Mexicans, all Catholics, had gathered for their weekly session of prayer, reflection and study. This was a new group that had only been meeting for two months. I was one of of ten North Americans who had joined them for the evening.

The cool evening air made a jacket or sweater important. Because of the extra visitors we sat on benches, chairs and stools in the yard. Children and teens stood on the fringes of the group. A single bare light bulb mounted on the side of the house provided the illumination. An amazing arrangement of microphone, cassette player, wires and ear phones provided the English speaking guests with a spontaneous translation of the proceedings.

After an opening song one lady began reading the same scripture passage that would be used the following Sunday at the parish Mass. After a few moments of

quiet a man began to read--but it was the same selection as the lady had just finished. Had the visitors so unnerved the reader than he lost his place? How embarrassing! Only later did we learn that they always do this, for the benefit of those in the group who are illiterate.

After a second and third reading the people began to share. They began talking about what they had heard. They began sharing how they thought these passages applied to their lives. And then there was a closing song. Cake and coffee were shared and they went their separate ways, until they would come again the following week.

This experience seems like a pretty common form of Bible study, similar to what takes place in many churches, in many countries. If we North Americans had been planning it we would probably have been more concerned about facilities, lighting, and the like. We might also have more carefully focused the sharing. The people seeemed to stray to non-religious topics. And their biblical interpretations contained some pretty flimsy exegis which no one stopped to correct.

Yet what I have just described is happening all over Latin America. The Spanish title is "comunidades

eclesiales de base." In English they are called base Christian communities, grassroots Christian communities, or just base communities. These comunidades eclesiales de base, commonly referred to as CEBs, are one of the most important recent developments within the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America (Gutierrez, 1982; Lee and Cowan, 1986). They are also a source of much tension within the Church. One author maintains that the CEBs are the most important factor in contributing to the civil unrest and armed struggle in Central America (Berryman, 1984, p. 7). Within the past ten years leadership, or even participation in these communities, frequently lead to torture and death in El Salvador, Guatamala and Nicaragua. I know of one priest in Guatamala who now is faced with the responsibility of training a new group of leaders because he lost most of the original leaders through murder and intimidation. And I maintain that the CEBs are one of the most important and innovative forms of adult education that has developed in recent years.

My first task in this paper is to summarize, in general terms, the history of the CEBs. In explaining their development it will be necessary to explore their relationship with church authorities, liberation

theology and the radical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. I will conclude by examining the potential implications CEBs have for those of us within the United States. Although there are parallel developments in other parts of the world, especially Africa and the Phillipines, I will restrict my analysis to Latin America.

History

The consensus of those who describe the historical roots of CEBs is that they can be traced to religious developments within the Brazilian Catholic Church in the late 1960's (Azevedo, 1987; Lee and Cowan, 1986; L. Boff, 1986). The Second Vatican Council, which had met intermittently between 1961 and 1965 and had involved Roman Catholic bishops and theologians from throughout the world, was now over. A major theme that underlied many of the documents from the Council was the call for greater spiritual devlopment among the people. The Council also developed the theological bases for greater involvement of the laity in the apostolate of the church.

At the conclusion of the Council the Brazilian hierarchy wanted to share these conclusions with the laity but was restricted by the relatively small number of clergy. They experimented with training lay leaders

who would continue to gather the people for prayer and education in the absence of a priest. The church leadership saw that this combination of small groups and lay leadership was quite successful (Azevedo, 1987).

Today, twenty years later there are over 100,000 such groups in Brazil alone. They are also found throughout South and Central America (Lee and Cowan, 1986). Although the experience with CEBs does vary from country to country there are certain aspects that remain constant. Participants primarily come from the lower class; there has been almost no CEB activity among the middle and upper classes. Azevedo also points out that they are stronger in countries with repressive military governments (1987, p. 150). CEBs have developed primarily within rural areas and on the outskirts of cities; the development within urban centers has been slower. Although the CEBs involve thousands of lay people and although lay people have taken increasingly important positions with the CEBs, the initiative has consistently come from priests and sisters.

CEBs also have a somewhat predictable pattern of development (Goldamez, 1986). They begin with the

preaching of the Gospel. At this point the message is quite traditional. What is different is that this discipleship or internship develops within a small group. A second phase consists in greater involvement in service to one another and to those outside the group. The CEBs bring together and unite their continuous process of reflection on religious topics and their reflection on the needs of one's neighbor. This combination of communal reflection and service then gives rise to a third phase, a growing consciousness of the evils around them. As they work to confront these evils, they then commonly face rejection and persecution by those who resist their message. They are frequently rejected by certain elements within Church leadership who suggest they should be "more ecclesial." However, what these leaders really want is a form of Christianity that is less threatening, less confrontive and more supportive of present leadership and the status quo. More often the rejection comes from authoritarian military governments that fear the critical thinking that the CEBs foster.

The historical analysis of the development of the CEBs poses a number of different alternatives. Is this

development simply a matter of a very effective institutional program that has been implemented on a large scale? Or is it some sort of cultural and social phenomenon which coincidentally happened to occur within a church setting? In examining these questions it is first necessary to consider the relationship of the CEBs to other contemporary developments within Latin America.

CEB's and the Church Hierarchy

As I mentioned above the origins of CEBs developed only after the Second Vatican Council which concluded in December of 1965. In the fall of 1968 the Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano, the Latin American Bishops' Conference or CELAM, met in Medellin, Columbia. Already this fledgeling CEB developments were singled out for praise by the bishops. Contained within the final document of the Medellin conference is the great hope that the CEBs will become a key factor in the on-going work of the church.

> The base Christian community is the fundamental nucleus of the church.... This community then is the initial cell in the structure of the church, it is the focus of evangelization efforts and presently a primary factor in human development.

(CELAM, 1968, p. 220).

These are high hopes for "program" so new and so decentralized.

On December 8, 1975 Pope Paul VI issued the encyclical Evangeli Nuntiandi (On Evangelization). The general concept of base communities is supported and praised by the Pope. However, there is also a strong tone of caution and apprehension in this section. He warns of communities that become so critical of the institutional church as to wound the unity of church. He warns of communities that see themselves as alternatives to the more structured church. He warns of communities that see themselves as the only authentic way of being church. If this happens the term base community is a sociological term. He calls for an emphasis on the ecclesial nature of base communities.

These admonitions raise questions about the extent to which the problems mentioned do indeed exist. Are these warnings based on purely theoretical possibilities? Or are these warnings based on wide spread abuses that are pervasive of CEBs? Or are these warnings based on occassional and unrelated abuses? From the tone of this section one is lead to believe

that these are very real dangers.

In January and February of 1979 CELAM met in Puebla, Mexico. This time the bishops had an entire decade of experience with the CEBs as the basis of their evaluation.

> "In 1968 base-level ecclesial communities [CEBs: Comunidades eclesiales de base] were just coming into being. Over the past ten years they have multiplied and matured, particularly in some countries, so that now they are one of the causes for joy and hope in the Church. In communion with their bishops, and in line with Medellin's request, they have become centers of evangelization and moving forces for liberation and development (CELAM, 1979, p. 136).

There are literally dozens of references to CEBs throughout the final document. Most carry this same positive and hopeful tone.

> As a community, the CEB brings together families, adults and young people, in an intimate interpersonal relationship grounded in the faith. As an ecclesial reality, it is a community of faith, hope, and charity. It celebrates the Word of God and takes its nourishment from the

> Eucharist, the culmination of all the sacraments. It fleshes out the Word of God in life through solidarity and commitment to the new commandment of the Lord; and through the service of approved coordinators, it makes present and operative the mission of the Church and its visible communion with the legitimate pastors. When they deserve their ecclesial designation, they can take charge of their own spiritual and human existence in a spirit of fraternal solidarity (CELAM, 1979, p. 212).

It appears from these references that the CEBs are more than another good project among many good projects. Rather they are a new way of being church.

The final document of Puebla does offer a word of caution. There is a concern voiced in this document that the CEBs may become an alternative to institutional Catholicism.

> Insofar as the church is a historical, institutional People, it represents the broader, more universal, and better defined structure in which the life of the CEBs must be inscribed if they are not to fall prey to the danger of organizational anarchy or narrow-minded, sectarian

> elitism. Some aspects of the whole problem of the "people's Church" [Iglesia popular], or of "parallel magisteria," fit in here. A sect always tends toward self-sufficiency on both the juridical and cotrinal levels. Integrated into the whole People of God, the CEBs will undoubtedly avoid such dangers and will measure up to the hopes that the Latin American Church has placed in them (CELAM, 1979, p. 157).

In response to this concern the bishops make a number of recommencdations. 1) Emphasize the ecclesial nature of the base communities. 2) Develop strong cooperation between the CEBs and the local parishes and dioceses. 3) provide greater training for the CEB leadership. 4) Commit resourcees to a greater historical, social and theological analysis of the movement. All in all, Puebla came out very strongly in defense of the CEBs and the cautions are much weaker than in the papal encyclical.

The situation since Puebla is much more difficult to assess. There have not been any official statements to in any way detract from the support of Medillin. In particular there seems to be some concern that the CEBs are becoming too political and loosing their sense of

being "ecclesial" groups. Some report that individual bishops are only tolerating the CEBs. Most of these reports are subjective and anecdotal and it is extremely hard for someone in the U.S. to evaluate current development.

CEBs and Liberation Theology

The term "liberation theology" is used to describe a certain way of thinking about theology that has developed within the past twenty years primarily in Latin America. The publication of A Theology of Liberation by the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez in 1971 was an important milestone in this very fruitful theological dialogue.

As some point out it might be more appropriate to talk about "theologies of liberation" since each author does indeed carry his own nuanced insights. However, there are certain themes for which there is sufficient consensus among liberation theologians such that one can speak of "liberation theology" in the singular. The purpose of this analysis is not to debate the theological orthodoxy of this approach or to dwell on these nuances but to analyze the historical linkage between liberation theology and the CEBs.

In each and every era Christian thinkers analyze the Gospel message in light of the modes of thought that are dominant at that time (C. Boff, 1987). The Greek thought that was dominant in the first and second centuries of the Christian era, reflecting the thought of Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus, focused attention on the dichotomy between the world of ideas and the world of matter. Thought was superior to matter. Soul was superior to body. As this mode of thought influenced theology, salvation was seen as something for the soul. True spirituality implied denying the body. Sin was seen as rooted in the body.

Liberation theology rejects such a dichotomous analysis of the human experience. Jesus Christ did not come to save souls; he came to save people. Gutierrez points out that the book of Exodus records God's saving act in leading the Jewish people out of slavery. The salvation that the Jewish people experienced was not a salvation of souls, but of the person. The political salvation from slaverey was linked to the spiritual salvation of the covenant (Gutierrez, 1971, p. 157).

A second area of emphasis for liberation theology is the emphasis on praxis. Throughout Christian history much of the theological reflection was done in

monasteries and universities. The reflection was highly abstract. Much of this reflection was based on philosophical concepts and methodologies.

Liberation theologians reject the abstract and theoretical nature of theology. They argue that the locus of theology is the lived experience of the people of God. Clodovis Boff argues that in the twentieth century the social sciences have replaced philosophy as the basis for theology.

The result is people are less inclined to talk about "church" as some abstract entity. Rather, they will focus on their concrete experience of church. Similarly, they will be reluctant to talk about some abstract reality like "sin". Rather, they will be inclined to talk about specific sins, for example the landowner who refuses to pay his workers or the corrupt politician who refuses to remedy systems of injustice (Hernandez Pico, 1982).

The liberation theologians argue that the rejection of dualism and of the abstract are basic cultural characteristics of the indigeneous peoples of Latin America. They argue that the genius of liberation theology is the ability to analyze reality in a way that is most characteristic of the people.

It is apparent in reviewing the literature on the CEBs that they have incorporated this mode of thinking. They see the forms of oppression and slavery to which they are subjected. They name the root causes of these experiences "sin." However, once they have named the government, or the economic system, or the landowner as "sin", then there predicament is not something to be fatalistically accepted as divinely ordained, but a situation which all people should work to overcome. The oppressive regimes of Guatamala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, of Brazil, Chile and Argentina were absolutely right in reading the threat that these communities posed to the status quo. They were accurate in seeing that they could not allow the communities to continue without their own control and power being severely questioned.

The Influence of the Pedagogy of Paulo Freire

The Brazilian cultural and historical milieu in which the CEBs first developed is also the milieu in which Paulo Freire developed his concept of "conscientization". Freire himself attributes the origin of the word to a brainstorming session of Brazilian intellectuals in the 1960's. He also suggests that it was Dom Helder Camara, bishop of

Recife, who popularized the term on an international level (United States Catholic Conference, 1970). During the last twenty years the term conscientization has been integrally linked with Freire's efforts at literacy education throughout Latin America and Africa. The term itself as well as its basic content have also been taken up by some elements of the Catholic Church in general and more specifically by the CEBs. It will be helpful at this point to take a look at certain key concepts in the writing of Paulo Freire and compare them with the modes of thinking popular within church circles.

In working with illiterate adults in Brazil Freire became aware of different levels of consciousness. The most primitive level is termed "semi-intransitive". It is at this dehumanizing stage that the individual is unable to differentiate self from the world. At this level of consciousness the individual is especially prone to magical and mythical explanations for reality. On the other end of the spectrum is critically transitive consciousness.

> The critically transitive consciousness is characterized by depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles

> for magical explanations; by the testing of one's "findings" and by openness to revison; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analyzing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive position; by soundness or argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old--by accepting what is valid in both old and new (Freire, 1973b, p. 18).

The process through which men and women proceed from a lower level of consciousness to a higher one is what Freire calls "conscientization".

Within the individual the methodology essentially linked with conscientization is praxis (Freire, 1970, pp. 75ff). Praxis refers to the linking of action and reflection. Action without reflection is activism. Reflection without action is verbalism. Neither activism nor verbalism can lead to critical consciousness. Through praxis, through this reflection linked with involvement, the individual comes to understand the true nature of the world. Through

praxis the individual comes to understand the real cause and effect relationships that exist within any given culture.

The natural context in which this praxis reflection can develop is one of dialogue. "The pursuit of full humanity, however, cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism, but only in fellowship and solidarity (Freire, 1970c, p. 73). Through dialogue men and women come together to name the world In the process of naming it, they come to understand the realities involved, they come to understand the cause and effect relationships. This process of dialogue is intensely humanizing (Freire, 1970, pp. 76-77). It is not that Freire sees something intrinsically impossible about an individual thinking alone. It is rather that his entire experience in assisting others has always invovled the group (Elias, 1974).

Pervasive throughout Freire's thought, especially as contained within Pedagogy of the Oppressed, is a suspicion of the rich and the powerful. In Freire's view of human development the oppressed are held responsible for their conscientization. The rich and powerful have been conditioned to accept the status quo

which grants and protects their dignity and power. Freire argues from logic and from experience that the poor cannot wait for the oppressor to soften. Within the blindness that is inherent in the oppressor there exists its own kind of oppression. Only the oppressed, through challenging the status quo, have the capability of initiating the liberation of the oppressor.

The word "conscientization" is itself used in the final document from Medellin (CELAM, 1968, p. 125). It is interesting to note that the Medellin Conference occurred in the same year that Freire completed his work on Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Throughout that document the Latin American bishops declare over and over that their concern is for the entire person, body and soul. They speak of a God "who wants to save the entire person, body and soul" (p. 42). They criticize the traditionalists who are only concerned with "spiritual" concerns. "The traditionalists and conservatives manifest little or no social consciousness, they have a middle class mentality, and at a minimum do not question social structures" (CELAM, 1980, p. 124). However, the bishops do add a religious nuance in that they link oppression with sin and liberation with salvation. Instead of liberatory

education, they speak of liberative evangelization (CELAM, 1980, p. 191).

For Freire all educational endeavors must be linked with conscientization if they are to be truly liberatory.

> Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.... In a way, however, we can go further and say that reading the word is not preceded merely be reading the world, but by a certain form of writing it or re-writing it, that is of transforming it by means of conscious practical work (Freire, 1983).

This quotation shows amazing similarity to one from Carlos Mesters, a biblical scholar active in Brazilian CEB's.

> So you see, when they read the Bible, basically they are not trying to interpret the Bible; they are trying to interpret life with thehelp of the Bible. They are altering the whole business. They are shifting the axis of interpretation (1982, p. 205).

The document from Puebla expresses this same relationship.

> Without falling into confusion or into simplistic identifications, one should always reflect the deep unity that exists between the salvific project of God as realized in Christ and the aspirations of humanity; between the history of salvation and human history; between the action revealed by God and human experience; between the gifts and supernatural charisms and human values (CELAM, 1980, p. 134).

With the mutual contribution of Paulo Freire and the liberation theology it is much easier to understand the ease with which the CEBs move from theological discussions to becoming social change agents. They have intentionally left behind a clear separation between body and soul.

The concept of "praxis" as developed by Freire has also become part of the language of liberation theology. In his book Theology of Liberation Gustavo Guitierrez uses the term and proclaims reflection upon existence as the locus of theology. Similarly, at Medellin, the bishops claimed that "the human situations and authentic human aspirations form an indispensible part of the content of religious education." (CELAM, 1968, p. 135). Implied in this

statement is a call for church leaders, whether in CEBs or other programs, to reflect on the concrete experiences of the group members.

But within the thought of Freire lies some of the present tension between the CEBs and church authorities. For Freire critique is the norm. For Freire the authority is always suspect. For Freire all forms of oppression are to be attacked. But yet the Roman Catholic Church is a strongly centralized operation. Certain beliefs and norms are presented as matters of faith. Some leader are not capable of dealing with the endless critique which the Freirean method implies. The question perhaps should not be "why has this tension developed" but "why has this tension not caused more problems than it has?"

In attempting to relate these various factors (CEBs, church developments, liberation theology, Freirean pedagogy) it becomes impossible to conceputalize any simple line of cause and effect. What becomes obvious is a complex web of interacting variables. What they share is the common social and historical milieu. If there is some line of cause and effect relationship, it might well be that the social and cultural values are the contributing variable.

Whether one reads the statements of the bishops, the works of the liberation theologians or the writings of Freire, there is a common theme that pervades. All are attempting to reflect on the lived experience of the Latin American people.

And so before we proceed to discuss the implications CEBs have for the U.S. we must remember that CEBs reflect their Latin American heritage. To the extent that they reflect the distinctive characteristics of their participants, to that extent they may be poorly suited for translation to another culture.

Implications for the U.S.

We can approach the implications that CEBs have for the U.S. from two angles. We can look at the implications that the content of CEBs might have. To what extent will this process of consciousness raising affect us in the north. We can also look at possible implications of the structure of the CEBs. First, let us look at the structure of the CEBs.

Lee and Cowan (1986) point out that CEBs have developed very slowly, if at all, within the United States, just as is the case with the middle and upper classes of Latin America. However, the small group

emphasis is predominant in a number of programs in adult religious education. Within the Roman Catholic Church, for example, programs like Renew, Little Rock Scripture Study, Marriage Encounter and a number of others utilize the small group interaction as an integral component of the program. Massification and anonymity are as much a problem within the U.S. as in Latin America. There seems to be a common desire to experience church on an intimate and community-oriented level. It is my personal prediction that we will see this grow. And I also believe that we will increasingly see conscientization as a goal within these small groups. However, I question whether or not conscientization would be possible within fundamentalist churches.

Let us now look at the content of the CEBs. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church previously contributed to a fatalistic acceptance of reality, that same Church is now helping the poor to identify the causes of their oppression as sinfulness. The following quote from the 1981 meeting of CEB leaders in Brazil reflects the united cry of the church and the poor.

On the first day we reflected upon our role within

> the Church of offering service to our people. What most impressed us was the suffering of our people. The people are being crucified, just like Jesus, by the powers of this world, by that great sin which is the capitalistic system which alone procures the benefit. From the north to the south, from the east to the west of Brazil, the same cry raises up from all parts. We are secure: "God hears the cry of the poor." The cry of the people is the call we are receiving from God. God invites us to work and struggle for the liberation of the people just as when he called Moses" (CELADEC, 1981, p. 7).

The final document of Puebla (CELAM, 1980, p. 166) and most recently the papal encyclical entitled "On Social Concern", written by Pope John Paul II in 1986, have also been extremely critical of capitalism. The encyclical went on to refer to the eastern and western blocs as "neo-colonials." This mixing of theological declarations by church authorities and the massive process of conscientization is something the rest of the world might be wise to take note of.

Our U.S. political and economic future is increasingly bound up with other countries. More and

more we rely on third world countries for resources, labor and markets. Our banking system is tied to them through their foreign debts. In recent years the military confrontations between East and West have taken place within the third world. Yet this unrest and dissatisfaction grows. This is a factor that leaders on all levels of government and multi-national corporations are going to have to take into account.

CEBs also pose a challenge to adult education. Running throughout the history of adult education in the United States there has been a concern for meaning. Of course the writing of Eduard Lindeman comes first to mind. But today the greater emphasis seems to be on technological training and HRD. Training is not itself bad. But the CEBs challenge us to find ways to raise the other issues, issues related to meaning and to value.

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